

Reps. Baird, Walden Introduce Forest Recovery Legislation (November 3, 2005)

Washington, D.C. - Congressmen Brian Baird (D-WA) and Greg Walden (R-OR) today introduced a bill to expedite the clean-up and restoration of federal forests after catastrophic events like wildfires, hurricanes, and windstorms.

The Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act (FERRA), HR 4200, was unveiled today at a news conference in the nation's capital. Its introduction comes after nearly two years of hearings by the Forests and Forest Health Subcommittee of the House Resources Committee that focused on problems plaguing the nation's forests after catastrophic events. Nearly 100 Members of Congress have signed on to the bill, including Congresswoman Stephanie Herseth (D-SD) and Congressman Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD) who helped Congressmen Baird and Walden draft the legislation.

"This is a responsible, common sense bill. People use wood to build homes, to make paper and that wood needs to come from somewhere. We can use wood from trees that are dead or dying, or from trees that are alive and healthy. Furthermore, we can responsibly harvest wood here at home, abiding by environmental protections and creating jobs, or we can get our wood from clear cuts in equatorial rainforests where the environment is far more fragile and environmental protection and labor laws are far weaker or even nonexistent," Congressman Baird said. "This bill will enable us to utilize dead timber instead of letting it go to waste and to responsibly restore the health and diversity of our forests after a catastrophic event like a fire or hurricane."

FERRA provides federal land managers with the tools and authority to rapidly assess forestland damage in the wake of catastrophic events like fires or hurricanes. If swift restoration work is necessary to restore the health of our nation's forests following such events, expedited but thorough environmental review of proposed actions would be performed by federal agencies, including full public notice and participation. Land managers would then be able to engage in active forest management practices to responsibly harvest dead and dying timber, restore landscapes, remove excess fuel loads, improve water and air quality, and prevent additional reforestation backlog.

"Today in America's forests, it can take three years for the federal government to cut a burned, dead tree after a fire. And by the time the decision is finally made, the trees have often rotted, become bug infested or lost most of their value. The Government Accountability Office reports that upwards of a million acres of forestland is in need of replanting. We can, and should, do better than that," said Congressman Walden, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health.

With 99 original sponsors from both sides of the aisle and throughout the nation, the Forest Emergency Recover and Research Act addresses a fundamental management issue that is not specific to any particular region or type of forestland. Forests damaged by hurricanes in the Southeast, ice storms in the Northeast, blow downs in the South, tornadoes in the Midwest, and forest fire in the West must all be actively managed following these catastrophes in order to restore their vitality.

The Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act of 2005:

*Limits the removal of timber to trees that are down, dead, broken or severely root sprung, where mortality is highly probably within five years of the event;

*Requires thorough environmental review, including full evaluation and mitigation of the environmental effects of a catastrophic event recovery project;

*Does not allow timber harvest in areas designated as Wilderness, National Parks or National Monuments;

*Requires an expedited National Environmental Policy Act procedural review, and mandates compliance with all environmental laws including the ESA, Wilderness Act, Clean Air Act, National Forest Management Act, Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, Federal Land Policy & Management Act, Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Forest &

Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act;

*Uses the exact same guidelines for public notice, appeals and judicial review established in the overwhelmingly bipartisan and effective Healthy Forests Restoration Act;

*Strictly prohibits the creation of permanent roads in forestlands;

*Increases the amount of public land that is rehabilitated, preventing future wildfires, insect infestation and disease outbreak;

*Requires the establishment of native or beneficial plants according to the approved forest or resource management plan;

*Strictly prohibits forest plantations;

*Increases the amount of peer reviewed scientific research conducted and made available to the public, federal land managers and policy makers; and,

*Is funded through existing trust funds and unobligated balances.

Today, more than ever, action is needed to restore federal forest lands after catastrophic events. Federal land managers' hands are often tied by process even when the best science and years of experience show that quick action is critical to restoring America's forest legacy," said Dr. John Helms, president of the Society of American Foresters. "In addition to the damage inaction causes to the forest, wildlife, and water, it is difficult for federal managers to reforest areas if they cannot first remove dead and dying timber. Unfortunately, many of the nation's forests often take years to recover on their own."

A legislative hearing on the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act will be held in the Forests and Forest Health Subcommittee on Thursday, November 10.

Congressman Baird illustrates the difference between restored and unrestored forest areas with a picture of Mount St. Helens

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